

Opposite: Vessel-like curved steel brings a maritime feel to the reception area.  
This page: Innovative thinking was employed to blend old and new elements of the heritage building.



## Historic destination

With less than six months to turn the top two levels of Auckland's former CPO into a modern office for shipping company Maersk Line, the team at Stack needed smooth sailing all the way. Words by Dionne Christian. Photos by Bruce Clarke.

The Kauri floors give it away. You might think you are in the most modern of offices until you look down and see the restored wooden floors pockmarked by dozens of high-heeled shoes.

It takes years to achieve that effect and indeed, hundreds of pairs of feet must have walked across those floors since the Chief Post Office (CPO) housed its first office workers in 1912.

Back then, one-tenth of Auckland's population gathered to see the CPO opened by former Prime Minister William Massey. The

crowds must have marvelled at the majestic building, in Oamaru stone, with its Baroque-style turrets and imposing façade.

They could hardly have imagined that eight decades later, the building would stand derelict and pigeon-infested as politicians planned, dreamed and debated transport schemes to bring rail – gone for more than 50 years – back to downtown Auckland.

But it's also nice to think those crowds would be pleased with what has become of their graceful CPO.

The building's lower floor is now the hub of regional public transport centre, and the upper floors fitted out for contemporary offices working in a global environment.

### OLD AND NEW

New interior design work has dovetailed with the building design in a sympathetic manner and adhered to the strict requirements of heritage architects. It truly is a blend of old and new where history echoes through the offices without hindering a new generation of

corporate professionals.

That, says Stack managing director Rose Whitley, was what she intended when her company successfully pitched to design shipping company Maersk Line's new corporate fit-out on levels two and three of landmark building.

"The offices were to be open-plan but with an extremely professional look that reflected Maersk's brand. We opted for practicality and clean lines with a distinct flow-through."

Stack had designed and managed Maersk's previous office fit-out in the Vero Centre. But when the Danish

transport and logistics company acquired P&O Nedlloyd in August 2005, the two businesses and their networks had to be integrated. That meant new premises capable of accommodating around 220 staff had to be found.

The solution was effectively 3488m<sup>2</sup> in a single downtown lease. Levels 2 and 3 of the CPO each provide a generous 1700m<sup>2</sup>, in addition to two 33m<sup>2</sup> towers – and rooftop access. The building appealed to Maersk not just because of its size, but also for its location, proximity to facilities and sense of history.

Maersk Line already took pride in its own heritage, which began in 1904 when Arnold Peter Möller and his father, Captain Peter Maersk Möller, established a steamship company in their native Denmark. The company's desire to pay homage to its roots

helped Whitley overcome potential dilemmas caused by the building's historical status.

Stack received word in September that its pitch had been successful and that Maersk wanted to settle into the new building in March. There was, Whitley says, little time to dwell on detail.

### HANDS ON DECK

"It was a real team effort with a group of us working 10 – 12 hour days. We needed all hands on deck. It was a pleasure to work with such an enthusiastic client who knew what they wanted from the process," she says.

From the outset, there were to be two distinct themes: The first would reflect Maersk's Scandinavian roots and the second would incorporate discrete and functional maritime touches.

Documentation for resource and

building consents was filed almost immediately, based on preliminary sketches. Whitley credits Auckland City Council for its response, saying it contributed to what was a highly collaborative atmosphere.

Whitley says the project was (almost) unique because New Zealand companies don't often get the opportunity to relocate to buildings as historic as the former CPO, but that also caused some design challenges.

Jasmax had already carried out extensive renovations to leave a base that was modern and flexible – but the building's heritage status meant certain historic features had to remain. These included feature columns throughout each floor, high ceilings and various beam heights, all painstakingly restored with elaborate cornices crafted by specialist plasterers. New bulkheads

and lowered suspended ceilings to disguise modern services added to a complex ceiling structure.

In addition, the building has large feature windows and was designed around a central atrium that protects its magnificent stained-glass domes. These glass features form part of the roof of the ground floor.

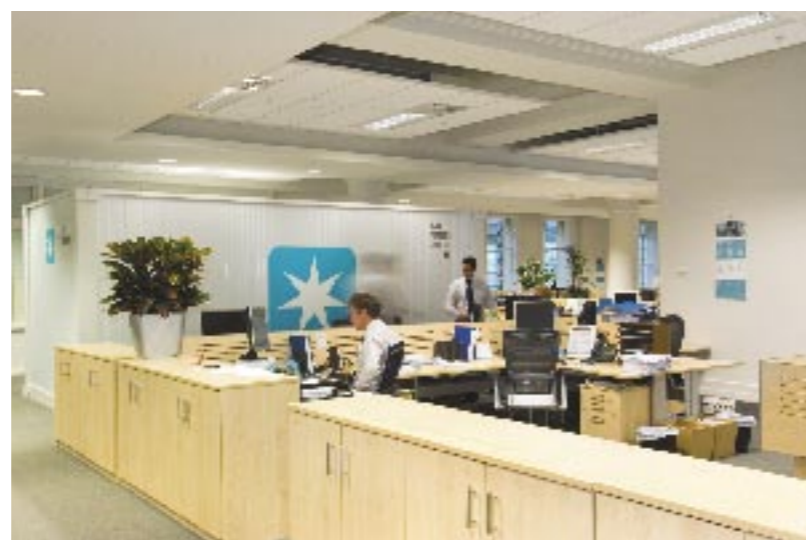
"We kept the interior low-key, light and clean and created a concept that did not fight with the building," says Whitley.

### MARITIME TOUCHES

The arrival area for a Maersk visitor – via the lifts or stairs – is some distance from reception. Heritage restraints meant no walls could be removed, although Stack has since received permission to open up one shielding reception from the lobby.

Whitley opted to ensure directions

Left: Columns that uphold CPO heritage marry Scandinavian simplicity. Right: The functionally modern boardroom is at home with its history. Below right: Freestanding storage rooms are styled on the company's shipping containers.



through this lobby are clearly marked and created what has become the 'Maersk gallery' for visitors to walk through. The gallery features images, models and maritime memorabilia, sourced both from the company and from specialist antique stores.

Once through the door to reception, images of Maersk ships on the world's seas appear in interchangeable illuminated panels, continuing the subtle company branding and introducing further colour and light.

Even the reception desk itself subtly reflects the curvature of the Maersk logo, and its thick painted steel gives a solid maritime vessel feeling. From this point, visitors enter either the spacious boardroom or the main office environment.

The boardroom contains simple but elegant furniture including

custom-made cabinets and a Matisse table. One wall of the room is a floor-to-ceiling double-glazed glass panel with in-built blinds for privacy.

#### TURRET LOUNGES

The boardroom also contains what may truly be a unique feature: an original wrought-iron spiral staircase up to a 33m<sup>2</sup> turret that has been transformed into an executive lounge. A matching tower at the opposite end of the building forms part of the roomy staff cafeteria.

While the boardroom is subtle, the café is vibrant. Here a more modern spiral staircase leads up to the turret which is used as a staff lounge, equipped with a large-screen television and comfortable chairs.

Both turrets lead to roof decks that can be used for functions or, in

summer, staff dining.

Meanwhile, the open-plan working space features standard 1800 x 1800 corner desks – with a clear mandate to keep everything neat, tidy, clean and below 100mm from desk height. The large and bright base building helps in this endeavour but so, surprisingly, do the central columns, which create a lengthening effect.

In one part of the building, glass has been cut to wrap round a column, separating one part of Maersk's business from another. Glass partitions are used where required to create separation, such as for the chief executive's office and the human resources department.

#### NOVEL STORAGE

Storage areas are common but cleverly disguised, allowing much clear and

open space in the main open offices. Alcoves modelled on actual shipping containers and branded with Maersk logos house utility areas, keeping photocopiers and stationery within easy reach but out of sight.

Two smaller rooms originally earmarked for meeting rooms were instead transformed into kitchens and are close to boardrooms, easing the delivery of food and beverages to catered meetings and briefings.

Whitley is clearly delighted with the end result, as is Maersk Line. Delighted staff are open and friendly, and for those who use public transport to get to work, it's a dream location. Others say they are simply pleased to have so much space.

"I think the needs of the business and the needs of the building have both been well served," says Whitley.

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Left: Modern kitchen facilities serve a large staffroom. Right: The staff television lounge is upstairs in a turret. Opposite page: A fairly unique boardroom feature.



The Level 2 floor plan.

## Britomart Rejuvenation

Successfully refurbishing Auckland's former Chief Post Office (CPO) – upstairs and down, inside and out – is a major step forward in the 10-year plan to transform the previously dilapidated Britomart precinct.

The \$350-\$500 million rejuvenation of the 5.8ha precinct on Auckland's downtown waterfront is the largest transport, heritage and urban restoration project undertaken in New Zealand. It involves restoring 17 heritage buildings and constructing six new buildings, on the area behind the CPO – bordered by Britomart Plc, Quay and Customs Sts – plus a new car park/retail development on a neighbouring site (formerly home to Auckland's Oriental Markets).

So far, refurbishment of the CPO, the Northern Steamship Company and Maritime Building is complete. The former is now a new restaurant and bar; the latter houses offices. Restoration of the Levy Building was due for completion last month, with a design gallery and wine bar on the ground floor and office space on the upper levels. Nine other heritage buildings are due to be leased by September.

The new buildings on site include two central towers of seven and nine stories, which will be linked with sky bridges and contain two levels of fashion stores. A public square, Takutai Square at the eastern end of the precinct, is in place while Station Plaza, behind the CPO, will be peppered with kiosks and sheltered walkways. In total, \$2m is to be spent on streetscapes, landscaping and lighting to enhance the precinct and link it with the rest of the city to attract people into the area.

Many Aucklanders won't recognise the place, especially those who rarely venture into town and remember Britomart as a run-down bus terminal surrounded by a car park and decaying office blocks.

Ideas to rejuvenate the area were discussed for decades (an underground Britomart station was proposed in 1973 and cancelled three years later), with decisive steps finally taken by Auckland City Council in the 1990s. The council then purchased nearly all properties on the Britomart block, including the CPO. A change of politicians meant a council 're-think' later in the decade but, following public



Maersk Line fully occupies the CPO's top two floors, plus both turrets.

consultation, a scaled down version went ahead in 2001. Aucklanders got their first glimpse of the future when, in 2003, the Britomart Transport Centre opened, including a modern underground rail station.

Full Britomart Precinct development plans were launched by Auckland City and Bluewater Consortium the following year. The development consortium, consisting of Bluewater Group, Multiplex and Phillimore Properties, took possession of the site in June 2004 and immediately started on the 10-year project. The consortium

dissolved in 2005 leaving Bluewater to 'go it alone' with the council, retaining long-term plans to develop and manage the precinct.

For an Aucklander whose work frequently takes her from the rural fringe of the region into downtown, it's exciting to see how fast the Britomart project is moving and to know that a slice of the city's history will be preserved. If current market conditions and the level of tenant interest continue, indications are that Britomart could be finished 2-3 years ahead of schedule.  
– Dionne Christian.

### SELECTED CREDITS

CLIENT Maersk Line • INTERIOR DESIGN Stack NZ • BUILDING OWNER Bluewater Group • PROJECT MANAGEMENT RCP • PLANNERS Barker & Associates • QUANTITY SURVEYORS WT Partnership • ENGINEERING Norman Disney & Young • FIRE CONSULTANT Holmes Fire • FIT-OUT Focus Construction • JOINERY Morrow • GLAZING FILM High Performance Window Films • FURNITURE Aspect, Matisse, IMO, Corporate Culture, Formway Furniture, UFL Group • CARPET Interface • DATA CABLING Datapacific • LIGHTING Targetti NZ • AUDIO VISUAL Resolution Audio Visual • SIGNAGE Sign Of The Times • BASE BUILDING RESTORATION Jasmax, Multiplex.

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